DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 264 RC 017 381

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TITLE Empowering Rural Communities for School Improvement.
PUB DATE Jul 89
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Community Development Society (20th, St. Louis, MO, July 24-27, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Involvement; Demonstration Programs; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Improvement Programs; *Rural Education; Rural Schools; School Community Programs; School Community Relationship; *Self Help Programs
IDENTIFIERS Appalachia Educational Laboratory WV; Kentucky; *School Community Improvement Process; Tennessee; Virginia; West Virginia

ABSTRACT

The school/community improvement process adapted by the Rural, Small Schools Program at the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) serves to revitalize and improve rural schools, incorporating commitment of both school and community leaders to rural school improvement. This paper describes implementation of the process in four school districts, one each in Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia. State advisory groups selected districts to participate on the basis of size, poverty, rurality, evidence of community leadership, and evidence of school leadership. In each demonstration site, AEL, working with the local school board, set up a school/community steering committee comprised of equal numbers of official and unofficial leaders from the school district and the community. Initial local data collection included a community needs assessment and a profile of school excellence, a diagnostic system which uses survey and interview data to assess schools' strengths in 11 areas associated with effective schools. All four communities selected a school improvement project, two involving parental involvement, one involving facilities feasibility, and one involving school climate. AEL staff will develop training materials and implementation manuals for use in replication of the process in other communities. (DHP)

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EMPOWERING RURAL COMMUNITIES FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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A paper prepared for the 20th Annual Meeting
of the Community Development Society,
July 24 - 27, 1989
St. Louis, Missouri

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Empowering Rural Communities for School Improvement

Education in the United States is in crisis. Recent reports tell us that the basic skills of the young people entering our workforce are inadequate for them to face a competitive labor market (U.S. Department of Education,1989). These reports by educational experts appear as aggregates of data, usually on a state level. Thus the nuances of the educational disparities continue to elude the public. America's public schools are primarily a suburban or urban phenomenon when looking at the number of students attending. Look outside of those metropolitan areas and you will find a more difficult set of challenges in the rural schools of America. Of the approximately 15,000 school districts in America, 75% enroll less than 2,500 students (K-12) and 55% enroll less than 1.000 students (K-12) (NCES,1897).

Today, rural America is faced with the problems of unemployment, underemployment, a higher incidence of poverty per capita, transportation, and communication problems. These deficiencies, along with the problems of sparsity of population, lack of adequate support services, and geographical isolation, provide the context within which the rural schools must operate.

Rural education is not new. Yet, federal and state educational policy gives little recognition to the needs of rural schools. Over one-quarter of all public school students in our country today, live in rural America (NEA Data Search, 1987). This paper presents a new approach to revitalizing/improving rural schools. The school-community improvement process adapted by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory comes directly from the community development literature. However, this community development process incorporates a commitment of both the school and community leaders to explore rural school-community improvement.

The Appalachia Educational Laboratory

The Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL), is one of nine regional education laboratories in the United States (Figure 1). As a private, non-profit corporation, the Lab operates primarily under a contract from the U.S. Department of Education. First chartered in 1966, AEL's original constituency was rural Appalachia. The Lab now serves all sections of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia as the result of new regional boundaries established in 1985.

The Rural, Small Schools Program (RSS) is the newest program at AEL. The program began in 1987 with the appropriation of four million dollars given directly to the nine regional educational laboratories throughout the country. This Congressional Rural Education Initiative appropriated additional monies for second year funding and the third year monies are pending.

The activities generated by the Rural Education Initiative are coordinated by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) through the U.S. Department of Education.

The Rural, Small Schools Program at AEL exists to:

- involve rural educators and citizens in the Lab's work to effect improvement in rural schools;
- to provide to rural educators and administrators information about practices that hold promise to meet the serious educational needs of rural Appalachia; and
- to show school staff and rural community members how to work together to study problems, plan solutions, and make the changes they want in their local school.

The AEL Rural, Small School program's mission is to use available resources in a way that will encourage long-term improvement of rural schools.

Problems and Needs of Rural, Small Schools in the AEL Region

The Rural, Small Schools Task Force (1987) recently conducted a survey of public school educators throughout the United States. These educators were asked to identify the educational needs of their schools. In comparison to the rest of the nation, rural Appalachia respondents and rural Southeastern respondents indicated the greatest number of educational needs and the most intense needs. According to the Task Force,

> The Appalachian and Southeastern regions share the bulk of the serious problems confronting rural, small schools. To an extent that far exceeds respondents from other regions, the Southeastern and Appalachian educators not only cite more problems, but the problems they point to are in greater need of attention (p. 10).

Rural educators in the Region identified five times as many strong needs as rural educators in the nation. Those same educators also identified fewer than one-third as many strengths. Looking at these needs in combination with the persistent economic and infrastructure problems, the needs of the Region become even more salient (West Virginia Rural Small Schools Task Force, 1989; Ross & Rosenfeld, 1988).

Entrenched, interrelated problems require more than superficial or "single-shot" remedies. The Executive Summary of the Proceedings from the 1988 Rural Development Policy Workshops speaks to this point:

> Limiting rural development to physical infrastructure and job creation is an unduly narrow definition of rural development. It is a definition that will not solve rural problems. This criticism of current federal policy is not designed to suggest too much money is being spent on infrastructure and job creation. It means that there is a need for a balance between building the capacity of people to deal with their problems, physical infrastructure and job creation. Such a balance does not currently exist. The definition of rural development and rural development

> policy needs to be broadened to encompass programs that build the capacity of rural residents to cope with change. This requires increased emphasis on education, health care, and programs designed to foster leadership (p.4).

The AEL School-Community Improvement Process

Schools in rural Appalachia play an important role in the life of the local community. The social and cultural life of these rural communities depend heavily upon the local schools. Teachers and their students are the largest single resource of the declining rural communities, given the current economic trends in the Region. AEL's School-Community Improvement Process recognizes these facts. This Process uses both the school and community resources to enhance the quality of life for all community members.

The Process is a flexible, readily adaptable empowerment process which uses data gathering techniques to increase the decision-making capacity at the local level. The process relies on three activities:

- Gathering of Specialized Information
  If knowledge is power, then the collection of local information is critical for the empowerment process to succeed.

- Accessing Others' Specialized Information
  Urban America has long had access to various types of specialized information and data. Recent advances in our information technology now make this information accessible to rural America. Through the use of these technologies, the barriers of spatial isolation from urban America will be broken. Communication and information, not highways, will shape the future of rural America.

- Leadership Development
  Success of the Process lies within the ownership and leadership of the local community. Thus the process provides for the training and nurturing of local leadership.

This Process is now in place in four rural school districts and one regional site in the AEL Region. Over the past two years the Rural, Small School staff has been refining the Process. This next year there will be and expansion in the original demonstration sites and further regional applications.

Conceptualization and Implementation

The intent of this Process is to help rural school and community leaders decide where to begin a school-community improvement project. By using the tools of inquiry and research-based development strategies, these leaders take local ownership of the project. In particular, this Process is meant to become a tool for continuing local community development activities . This process from the beginning, sought to avoid the raising of expectations as was done by earlier projects. Many of those projects ended when external resources were withdrawn.

State Advisory Groups The first step in implementing the Process was to assemble State Advisory Groups for each of the four AEL states. Prominent educators and community leaders, make up the Advisory Groups. The role of the State Advisory Group members was to:

- identify rural education leaders and other persons who know about exemplary programs being conducted in the rural, small schools of their particular state.
- from eligible districts identified, priority rank the school district(s) to be invited to participate in the AEL Process.
- help the AEL Rural, Small School staff in contacting key personnel in the ranked sites.
- maintain communication with the Rural, Small School staff regarding the progress of the overall Rural, Small School program.

- assist in the dissemination of information about the Rural, Small Schools Program.

Once set up, the Advisory Group members were given two sets of criteria for selection of school district demonstration sites. The first set of criteria were:

1. Small Size - under 3,000 enrollment for county districts, under 1,500 enrollment for independent districts.
2. Rurality - more than 75 percent non-metro population,
3. Poverty rate of families with children must be above 25 percent. For Kentucky and West Virginia the source of data was Market Data Retrieval; Virginia and Tennessee poverty data came from the U.S. Census.

Once the districts had met the eligibility criteria, then the Advisory Group members used a set of qualitative characteristics to further cut the number of school districts eligible for implementing the school-community improvement process. Table 1 lists these characteristics.

TABLE 1
Characteristics of Desirable Demonstration Sites

I. Evidence of Community Leadership
- community-wide events for fund raising
- proceeds used for community improvement
- leadership passed around, not dominated by a few
- candidates for political positions not in short supply
- tone of news coverage (supportive of schools)
- conflicts handled productively

II. Evidence of School Leadership
- superintendent supported by board of education
- superintendent's contract renewed or likely in future
- administration viewed as effective leadership
- administration recognized in state or region
- board members viewed as community leaders

- board members undertake long-term planning
- board members not continually putting out brush fires
- teacher attitudes are positive: school, students, and community
- teacher turnover due to advancement, not dissatisfaction

Two of the demonstration sites began implementation in the summer of 1987. At that time the Rural, Small School staff began the first phase of the School-Community Improvement Process. Figures 2-4 give an overview of the Process and its implementation.

In each demonstration site, AEL--working with the local school board--set up a School-Community Steering Committee. This committee comprised of equal numbers of official and unofficial leaders from the rural, small school district and from the rural community. The duties of this committee include:

- to maintain a local resource/information center
- to create a temporary study group to identify important needs
- to decide which changes/improvements to address, and to create a temporary planning group to design such improvements,
- to recommend to the school board and local government the implementation of one plan for educational improvement, and
- to monitor the carrying out of the plan through a small implementation committee made up of both school district and community members.

Data Collection

Initial local data collection included a two-step needs assessment process. The first step was a Community Needs Assessment involving concerned community citizens. The second step was the Profile of School Excellence.

Community Needs Assessment This assessment gathers information about the perceived educational needs of the local citizenry in the demonstration

sites. The expressed purpose of the needs assessment is to learn what the local citizenry considers to be the most important educational needs of the county.

Those who attend this activity represented various constituencies within the community. They may be from different sections of the county, have children in different grades, belong to specific community organizations, or simply be an interested resident of the county.

The needs assessment process includes:

1. An overview of the School-Community Improvement Process.
2. Individual practice in writing needs statements.
3. Writing initial needs statements in small groups.
4. Searching for clarity and understanding within each group.
5. Rating the importance of all the needs described in each group.

The needs assessment activity requires the participants to structure their contributions in a particular way so the statements of need will yield clear implications. The information can be gathered efficiently at the meeting and presented usefully to the School-Community Steering Committee.

The Profile of School Excellence is a diagnostic system developed by AEL. The system draws on the school effectiveness literature to show how school districts rate on several of effectiveness factors. This system uses survey and interview data from students, teachers, principals, and district staff to assess the schools' strength in each of eleven characteristics positively associated with effective schools:

- a needs-based curriculum
- academic objectives
- clear understanding of superintendent, principal, teacher, and student expectations
- classification of individual roles and responsibilities
- conditions and resources for learning

- instructional time/task orientation
- use of student assessment
- system of rewards/reinforcement for students/staff
- knowledge of school code
- school climate
- parent support and involvement

When schools pay particular attention to these eleven characteristics, the district is likely to become more effective. Districts with effective schools exhibit the following factors:

- achievement data show that students' performance is not tied to socioeconomic background
- attendance is high
- incidence of truancy and vandalism are low; and
- students, staff, administrators, board members, parents, and citizens exhibit a high level of satisfaction with the schools.

The Profile of School Excellence (Pro S/E) diagnostic system helps school districts identify strengths and weaknesses related to research on effective schools. A Pro S/E study is low key and nondisruptive. All data is gathered in one day with no interruption of classes.

Progress Report - School-Community Improvement Process Demonstration Sites

As was stated earlier, a school district from each of states which AEL serves. Table 2 shows the selection criteria as they are reflected in each of the districts.

TABLE 2

School District Characteristics

District	Type of District	Enroll	Personal Income Per Student	% Rural	% Poverty
Kentucky	County	2,196	$ 25,084	79.0	>25.0
Tennessee	County	1,412	15,602	100	32.0
Virginia	County	2,311	20,676	100	26.0
West Virginia	County	2,699	20,961	100	>25.0

In Kentucky, those school districts in the Fifth Congressional District were intentionally excluded in this selection process. This was because of the existing "Forward in the Fifth" program--a special project directed at school improvement in Eastern Kentucky. The underlying reason for elimination of those schools was that otherwise the Kentucky State Advisory Group would have to consider over 40 eligible school districts. Dropping the 5th Congressional District schools from eligibility yielded 13 eligible sites. This was still the largest number of eligible districts in the four states.

In Virginia, the AEL staff used 1980 Census data as the source for the eligibility criteria. The poverty criterion, because of the differing economic conditions in this state, were lowered to 23 percent. This gave a pool of six eligible districts. Finding enough poor districts with a 25 percent or greater poverty rate was no problem in West Virginia or Tennessee.

The similarities of the characteristics of these four school districts are deceiving. The operationalization and implementation of the school-community improvement process each local community resulted in a unique application of this community development model. As Table 3 shows, although the districts were introduced to the process at approximately the same time--two in the fall of 1987, and two in the fall of 1988--how quickly they progressed through the steps in the process varies considerably.

TABLE 3

Operationalizing the Process

	Kentucky	Tennessee	Virginia	West Virginia
Superintendent Board Approval	Summer 1987	Summer 1988	Summer 1988	Summer 1987
Data Collection	Early Fall 1987	Early Fall 1988	Early Fall 1988	Early Fall 1987
Community PRO-S/E	Early Fall 1987	Early Fall 1988	Early Fall 1988	Early Fall 1987
Meetings:				
Steering Committee	September 1987	September 1988	September 1988	September 1987
o Study Group	October 1987	October 1988	October 1988	October 1987
o Planning Grp.	November 1988	November 1988		
Steering Committee Rec => School Bd.	Spring 1988	February 1989	December 1989	Spring 1988
Implementation of Project	January 1988	To begin school term 1989-90	January 1989	January 1989
Completion of Project	May 1989	December 1989	March 1989	September 1989
Debriefing of Steering Committee		December 1989	June 1989	September 1989
Next Meeting Steering Committee	August 1989	August 1989	August 1989	August 1989

Some of these differences can be explained by the nature of the project chosen. Other time lags are due to the individual community differences in the ownership taken by the local steering committee. Still another factor in the variation of implementation was the leadership role of the school superintendent.

For example, although the Virginia demonstration site was actually the last school district introduced to the school-community improvement process, they were the first to complete the process. They have already held a debriefing session in June 1989 with their steering committee. Much of this can be attributed to the nature of the project--a feasibility study of the middle school and high school facilities. An outside consultant group was enlisted to complete the feasibility study and completed this task in a matter of two months.

In the first two sites, Kentucky and West Virginia, several activities were planned within the chosen projects. Activities which took time to collect data for analysis, including pre- and post- tests.

The Tennessee site, due to an unexpected illness of the Superintendent, lagged in the implementation process. This project, the development of a school-community newsletter, will however be enhanced by the special training which the English teacher will receive this summer from the Eastern Tennessee Foxfire Teachers Network.

Anyone who works in the area of community development knows that a one or two year process is not a sufficient period to effect real change in a local community. The AEL School-Community Improvement Process has really just begun and we may not see a real tangible result for several years. Table 4 shows the outcomes to date of the process.

TABLE 4

Outcomes of School-Community Improvement Process

	Kentucky	Tennessee	Virginia	West Virginia
School/Community Involvement				
o Steering Comm.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
o Did they choose school improvement project?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
What?	Parental Involvement	Parental Involvement	Facilities Feasibility	School Climate
Data Collection				
Community Needs Assessment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PRO-S/E	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Additional Data Sources Used	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Which?	ERIC	ERIC	ERIC	ERIC
Will process become institutionalized?	Possibly	No	Possibly	No

If one were to look at the objectives of the Rural, Small School Program at the Appalachia Educational Laboratory, then this community development activity is off to a good start. All four districts enlisted the participation of both school and community members in the identification of school and community needs. Each community selected a school improvement project that was reasonable for a first time collaborative activity.

Data collection and analysis of the local needs was the primary tool for the decision making process. Each community relied upon a cross-section of it's particular locality to provide community data. All students in the

schools were given the opportunity to contribute their perceptions of their school. Likewise, all Steering Committees made use of additional, outside, sources of information.

The Future of the AEL School-Community Improvement Process

Whether the process will be institutionalized in any of the four communities is still not clear. The RSS staff will not decide this point.

During the final year of funding from the Congressional Rural Education Initiative the Rural, Small Schools staff propose to extend the original community development process.

- The AEL staff plans to continue working with the four demonstration sties to continue to develop the school-community improvement process. These continued activities will help to strengthen local ownership-- which will increase the chances of institutionalization.
- AEL Staff plans to develop a final set of training materials and implementation material/manuals for use in replication of the process in other school districts/communities. These materials will include improvements made as the result of AEL's experience during the last two years of pilot testing.
- At least one replication of the process will be implemented, with no on-site assistance from AEL. This will test the training materials developed to date by the RSS staff.

By continuing this project into the third year, AEL's Rural, Small School Program will be able to further study how the use of community development principles apply to the planned improvement of rural schools and local community development. The process is evolutionary, and will be unique to each locality. Collectively, however, this project will be able to point the way for others who are interested in becoming involved in such activities.

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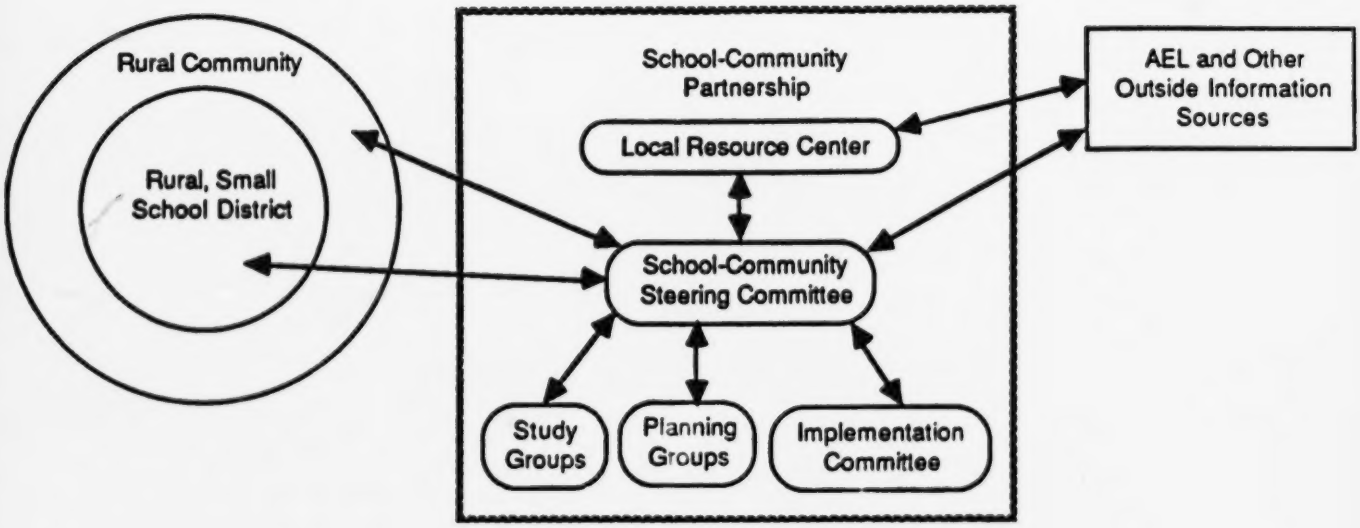
Figure 1

Educational Laboratories Serve Designated Regions of the Country

APPALACHIA	Appalachia Educational Laboratory Charleston, West Virginia
CENTRAL	Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory Aurora, Colorado
MID-ATLANTIC	Research for Better Schools Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
MIDWEST	North Central Regional Educational Laboratory Elmhurst, Illinois
NORTHEAST	The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement for the Northeast and Islands Andover, Massachusetts
NORTHWEST	Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory Portland, Oregon
SOUTHEAST	Southeastern Regional Improvement Laboratory Research Triangle Park, North Carolina
SOUTHWEST	Southwest Educational Development Laboratory Austin, Texas
WESTERN	Far West Laboratory San Francisco, California

Figure 2



The School-Community Partnership for School Improvement

Figure 3

Permanent Steering Committee and Temporary Groups

Steering Committee

• about 20 people • 1/2 school • 1/2 community	structure
• appoints 2 temporary groups • works with groups • selects improvement project	function
• undertakes a second project in school or community	goal

Temporary Groups

	Study Group	Planning Group	Implementation Committee
structure	• small (5-8) • non-SCSC members OK	• small (5-8) • non-SCSC members OK	• small (2-4) • SCSC only
function	• studies reports • develops 5 or 6 need statements	• studies 1 need in depth • plans improvement project	• monitors implementation • seeks outside resources as necessary
goal	• facilitates first improvement project	• facilitates first improvement project	• facilitates first improvement project

Figure 4

Work Flow for First Project: Steering Committee and Temporary Groups